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061/6/WH
DEB 39-87
October 1987

NOFORN

Defense Estimative Brief

Venezuela-Colombia Maritime Dispute: Future Security Implications (C)

Key Judgments

(S/NF) Despite the recent incident in the Gulf of Venezuela involving the dispatch of a Colombian corvette into disputed waters, we believe the longstanding maritime boundary dispute between Venezuela and Colombia will not lead to armed conflict over the next few years. Nevertheless, military weaknesses highlighted by this incident will create pressures on both governments to increase defense spending and to give greater priority to acquiring major military equipment such as fighter aircraft, missiles, and possibly ships.

(S/NF) Economically, both countries can ill-afford large unbudgeted military outlays, particularly for hardware which would not be the type most needed to deal with their principal internal security threats. While some needed military improvements will likely be made as a result of this incident, it remains to be seen if basic problems in logistics, supply, and crisis management will be corrected.

(S/NF) No early resolution of the dispute is foreseen, but both governments realize that a war would be counterproductive and they will likely seek a diplomatic solution. Each country will look to the United States for support, but concern that Washington might favor the other side could lead to frictions in bilateral relations with the United States.

Military Acquisitions Likely Following Incident

(S/NF) The mid-August 1987 flare-up of the dispute between Venezuela and Colombia over the undefined territorial sea boundary in the Gulf of Venezuela raised the spectre of military confrontation between two friends of the United States. The incident erupted when Colombian President Virgilio Barco apparently miscalculated in his effort to get stalled negotiations moving again on the 150-year-old dispute — made more significant in recent decades by discovery of petroleum deposits in the Gulf. Barco's dispatch of a Colombian Navy corvette to the disputed waters provoked an unexpect-

edly quick and forceful response from his Venezuelan counterpart, Jaime Lusinchi. The armed forces of both countries went on alert, and the governments engaged in menacing sabre-rattling. Initial hostile reactions and rhetoric on both sides have cooled and we believe the chances for armed conflict are small, but the incident has several important future security implications for both countries.

(S/NF) The incident made civilian and armed forces leaders in the two countries acutely aware of how unprepared they are for conflict. As a result, it appears that the military of both countries will benefit from emergency supplementary allocations designed to shore up

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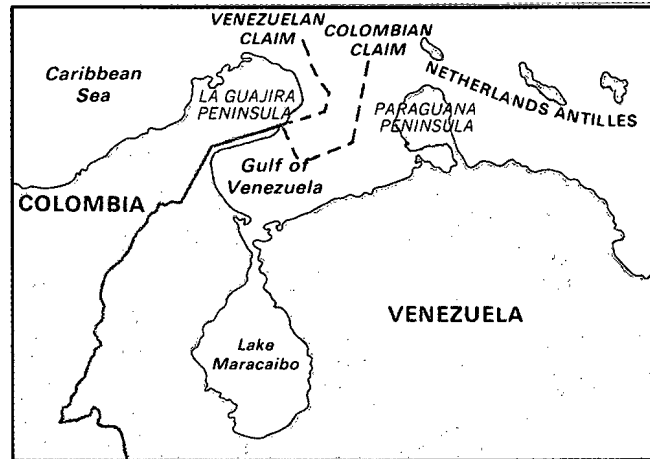
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some of their most noticeable shortcomings. Major defense expenditures — particularly unbudgeted — would present serious problems for these already over-burdened economies, but neither administration wants to be accused of leaving its country in a weak and vulnerable position.

(S/NF) It is also likely that in the emotional atmosphere generated by this incident the armed forces in both countries will press for major acquisitions such as fighter aircraft, ships, and missiles — air-to-air, air-to-surface, and shipborne surface-to-surface. While there is a need for such items to upgrade both militaries' conventional capabilities, the principal threats facing these countries will continue to be of an internal security nature. Colombia will continue to face a major insurgency and one of the world's largest illegal narcotics operations, while Venezuela will have to deal with continued cross-border activities by Colombian guerrillas and narcotics traffickers, as well as its own small yet growing narcotics problems. We expect that both countries will experience significant in-fighting among the military services as they compete for these windfall funds. Misdirected acquisitions and internecine friction would hinder efforts to meet and counter these threats.

(S/NF) At the same time, beneficial side effects may be derived from the incident. The military of both countries appear to recognize that their crisis management procedures and operational readiness and planning are seriously inadequate. It was particularly apparent that their logistical and communications capabilities to respond to a crisis are marginal at best. Both have indicated that steps will be taken to correct these problems, but it remains to be seen if they will take proper corrective measures. Perhaps the most positive revelation, however, is that both countries — but Colombia in particular — realize they would not fare well in a war with the other and that conflict would only aid their internal enemies. While keeping the military option open, we believe both will be reluctant to use force in lieu of diplomatic initiatives.

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"(C) No early resolution of the maritime border is foreseen, but both countries will likely seek a diplomatic solution."

(S/NF) No settlement of the dispute is in sight, and tensions and strained relations between Colombia and Venezuela over this issue will persist. Venezuela believes the problem should be handled bilaterally, along with other more important issues. It further believes that it has ceded too much territory throughout its history and vows that its will lose no more. It therefore favors maintaining the status quo. In addition, Lusinchi does not want to do anything to prejudice his party's prospects in next year's presidential elections. As a result, we expect little movement by Venezuela to resolve the dispute.

(S/NF) Colombia would like to see the dispute put before the International Court of Justice or some other international arbiter, but prospects of Venezuela agreeing to this are not good. Barco will attempt to keep the issue in the international spotlight but, considering the Venezuelan reaction to the latest incident, he will move cautiously to keep the dispute at the diplomatic rather than the military level.

Implications for the United States

(S/NF) An armed conflict between the two oldest democracies in South America would bring into doubt the ability of elected civilian governments to settle problems and would

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increase the influence and power of the military. It would also seriously weaken Latin American collaborative efforts to attack regional problems. For instance, Venezuela and Colombia constitute half of the Contadora nations and a conflict would greatly hinder, if not cripple, that group's efforts, particularly regarding peace initiatives in Central America. Such a confrontation might also prompt other countries in the area with border disputes to consider an armed solution, although — as with the Falklands dispute — such actual armed conflict usually has a sobering effect.

(S/NF) Even without a conflict, this incident will impede recent efforts by both countries to cooperate on counterterrorism and anti-narcotics matters. In addition, Colombia and Venezuela will seek support for their position from other countries in the area, and this will have the potential to cause regional divisiveness. Both will also look to the United States for support — diplomatic as well as military — or for signs of US favoritism toward one or the other. Such sensitivities could easily lead to some minor friction in their relations with Washington.

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